Steeped in History, Diverse in Nature

The Delaware is the longest un-dammed river east of the Mississippi.

But it's not big as rivers go. The Nile, the Amazon, the Yangtze - each stretch for some 4,000 miles.

The Delaware River and the bay it flows into are but 330 miles long. Size, however, doesn't speak for their might.

Roughly half of New York City's water comes from Delaware River headwater reservoirs. The Delaware and its tributaries serve up water to Philadelphia and a cluster of other nearby riverbank cities, which collectively comprise the world's largest freshwater port.

In all, over 17 million people, or 6.4 percent of the U.S. population, rely on the river, its feeder streams, and its reservoirs for their water.

The Delaware is a river of diverse demands and moods. Fed by the runoff from four states, it tumbles out of New York State's Catskill Mountains, trips over the rocks at the head of tide at Trenton, then glides towards the Delaware Bay.

Giant cargo ships and barges cross the bay or enter it through the Chesapeake and Delaware Canal to off-load at piers along the river's tidal reach, the products supporting a sprawl of heavy industry and one of the nation's largest oil refining-petrochemical centers. Upstream, bald eagles hunt for prey along the river's main stem and feeder streams that support a world class trout fishery. Canoeists and tubers seek out riffles and rapids.

On Christmas night, 1776, George Washington crossed the Delaware River with 2,400 men and 18 pieces of artillery and won a devastating victory over a Hessian garrison at Trenton, N.J., early the next day. *(The American Revolution, John Grafton)*

The Delaware is abundant with natural wonders, its waters beckoning those yearning for a true river adventure.

And like the land it dissects, it is steeped in history.

It winds through Pennsylvania's Lehigh Valley, birthplace of America's Industrial Revolution.

The Delaware

Ice coats the Delaware River at Philadelphia during the winter of 1856.

(Courtesy of Harry Shaw Newman, The Old Print Shop)

George Washington and his Continental Army crossed the Delaware on Christmas night, 1776, ambushing a party of Hessian troops in Trenton. It was a turning point in the Revolutionary War. Forty-four war ships rot in watery graves on the river's bottom, scuttled during that war to keep them out of enemy hands. During the Civil War, 12,000 Confederate soldiers were imprisoned on Pea Patch Island, downstream of New Castle, Del., a riverbank settlement colonized by the Dutch in 1651.

William Penn signed a treaty with the Lenape Indians on the Delaware's banks.

The river empties into the bay, which washes by old whaling towns. Upstream it flows beneath the Delaware Aqueduct, built by engineer John Roebling who designed the fabled Brooklyn Bridge. Facing the aqueduct, said to be the oldest existing wire suspension bridge in the United States, is the house where Zane Grey lived before heading West. He left a New York City dental practice behind, plus a lot of lore.

Grey and others wrote about the river.

Walt Whitman discovered poetry in its commerce, describing the steam tugs that plied it as "saucy little bullpups of the current."

William Penn was 38 years old and a Quaker when he first came to America. He was the son of an admiral and, in his youth, served briefly in a military capacity in Ireland, at which time this picture was made.

(Watson's "Annals of Philadelphia")

Rudyard Kipling wrote about war:

The snow lies thick on Valley Forge,
The ice on the Delaware,
But the poor dead soldiers of King George
They neither know nor care.

A canal boat crosses the Delaware River via the Delaware Aqueduct. The last passage by boat occurred in 1898.

(Courtesy of Mrs. Louise K. Flora)

Thomas Eakins painted sailboats skipping over the bay's white-capped waves and sculls racing on the Schuylkill, the Delaware's largest tributary.

As a result of a remarkable comeback in water quality and a growing appreciation of her myriad attractions, much of the Delaware River and numerous feeder streams today are part of the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System - a designation most often reserved for bucolic trout streams out West. And the tidal reach of the Delaware, along with the Delaware Bay, are part of the National Estuary Program, a project set up in 1988 to protect estuarine systems of national significance.

"... the future of the Delaware River ... is vital to the economy of the regions surrounding this important waterway," noted President Clinton after signing a bill designating a reach of the lower Delaware as part of the scenic system. "By allowing local municipalities to sustain and protect the Delaware River as one of our nation's national treasures, this law will help to ensure the vitality of these communities and the quality of life of their citizens."

A Remarkable Recovery

Blazing a new trail in water pollution abatement, the Delaware River Basin Commission in 1967 adopted the most comprehensive water quality standards of any interstate watershed in the nation. The standards were tied to an innovative waste load allocation program which factored in the waste assimilative capacity of the tidal Delaware River. A year later, the commission adopted regulations for implementing and enforcing the standards, prompting the Federal Water Pollution Control Administration to observe: "This is the only place in the country where such a procedure is being

followed. Hopefully, it will provide a model for other regulatory agencies."

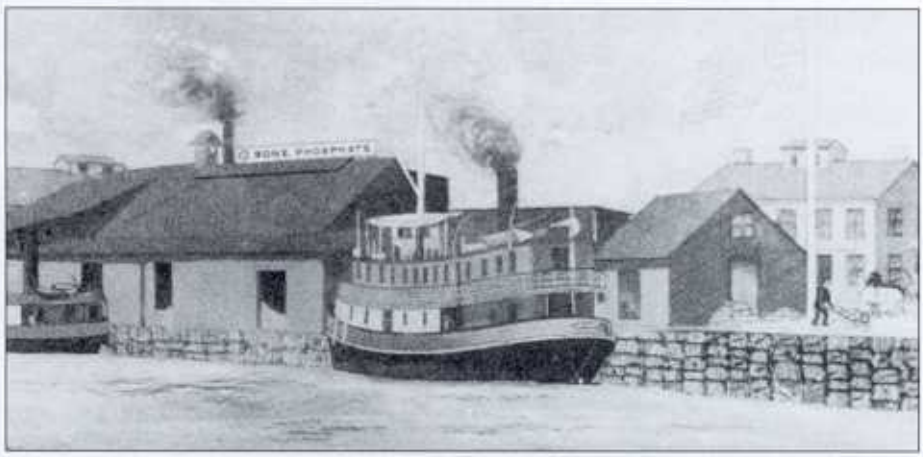
Today, the Delaware River supports year-round fish populations, offering excellent trout, bass, walleye, herring, and shad fisheries. A telltale year in the river's comeback was 1981 when Fred Lewis, operator of the only commercial shad fishery on the non-tidal Delaware, netted 6,392 shad. It was the biggest catch since1896 when his father was running the business.

"... the cleanup of the Delaware has been heralded as one of the world's top water quality success stories," remarked Delaware Governor Thomas R. Carper at a riverbank ceremony in 1996.

Perhaps Charles Kuralt had the Delaware in mind when he mused: "I started out thinking of America as highways and state lines. As I got to know it better I began to think of it as rivers. America is a great story, and there is a river on every page of it."

A Delaware River rafting crew. The captain is on the extreme left.

(Courtesy of Mrs. Walter J. Hankins)



The town of Smyrna on the Smyrna River in Delaware exported peaches and phosphate. J. E. Tygert & Co. owned this steamboat which, beginning in 1875, carried produce and passengers to Philadelphia.

("Encyclopedia of Delaware")

But it was U.S. Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell who perhaps best captured a feel for the river's true worth. In a 1931 decision involving the sharing of the Delaware's waters he wrote, "A river is more than an amenity, it is a treasure."

Port Delaware, (near Phillipsburg, N.J.) was the location where coal barges from the Lehigh River crossed the Delaware and entered the Morris Canal on their way across New Jersey to Newark.

(Courtesy of William Augustine)

The Delaware River Basin

The Delaware River Basin extends 330 miles from it headwaters at the Catskill Mountain town of Hancock, N.Y., to the mouth of the Delaware Bay. The basin contains 13,539 square miles, draining parts of Pennsylvania (6,422 square miles, or 50.3% of the basin's total land area); New Jersey (2,969 square miles, or 23.3%); New York (2,362 square miles, 18.5%); and Delaware (1,002 square miles, 7.9%).

From Hancock, the river flows for 282 miles before emptying into the Delaware Bay at Liston Point, Del. The mouth of the bay (where the bay empties into the Atlantic Ocean) is marked by an imaginary line connecting Cape Henlopen in Delaware and Cape May in New Jersey. The bay itself is 48 miles long (from Liston Point to its mouth).